

31 August 1984

KOREAN AIRLINER
INCIDENT

UNIDENTIFIED WOMAN'S VOICE (over intercom in airport): Flight 17, from New York bound for Seoul, now is ready for passengers reboarding. SCHAKNE: There have been some changes in a year. There is no Korean Airline Flight 007 any more. Now, it's called Flight 017. The airline is refurbishing its image, repainting its jumbo-jets, using a new logo, and in a change that is more than just cosmetic, ordering its planes to fly an air route 60 miles further away from the Soviet coast than they used to. UNIDENTIFIED MAN: Flight 0902 will be on 80122, westbound R-80.

SCHAKNE: In the most important change, these American civilian flight controllers here in Anchorage now use military radar to watch all commercial airlines as they pass a mid-ocean checkpoint. Since November, this radar in the Aleutian Islands has been used to bring 38 trans-Pacific flights back on course. LEROY STRATMAN (FAA): It gives us a check of approximately 900 miles, nautical miles, further out than we used to be able to do it. It's a double check that we didn't have a year ago.

SCHAKNE: It's a double check that, if available a year ago, could have warned Flight 007 it was off course a half hour before the plane crossed into Soviet territory. But in the last year, some other recommended changes have not taken place, still leaving a 1,600-mile flight path along the Soviet coastline where pilots must fly on their own without any ground-based navigational aids. Most important, one year later, there is still no answer to that most troublesome question of all: just why Flight 007 strayed so badly off course? The International Civil Aviation Organization's investigation concluded that the most plausible explanation is pilot error, but a second report said none of these findings are conclusive, that they all contained some points that could not be explained satisfactorily. This official uncertainty has spawned a cottage industry of intelligence conspiracy theorists, writers, military analysts and aviation specialists who alledge an American intelligence involvement.

ROBERT ALLARDYCE : The pilot of Korean Airlines 007 was knowingly off course. He was acting out his part in a very complex, preplanned operation, the purpose of which appears to have been to bring the whole Russian theater of operation to a full military alert.

SCHAKNE: Allardyce, a flight engineer, says computer simulation, weather and radar data prove his theory, but when pressed, he provides no independent corroboration. Sen. Patrick Leahy of the Intelligence Committee, a frequent critic of covert operations, has carefully

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checked out secret records, and he says the conspiracy theories have no basis. SEN. PATRICK LEAHY (D-Vt.): The Korean Airline jet was not acting on behalf of the United States, and there was no way that we could've warned it.

SCHAKNE: Another question: with all the sophisticated electronic intelligence outposts watching the Soviet-Asian coast for a Soviet missile that night, ground-based radar, ships at sea and reconnaissance planes, why didn't American intelligence know that Flight 007 was off course and send a warning? Assistant Secretary of State Richard Burt was on duty the night Flight 007 went down. Did you check with the intelligence community, and what did they know that night, and when did they know something definitive? RICHARD BURT: They knew zero. We do not have the capability, as much as people would like to think we have the capability, to know whenever the Soviet Union scrambles fighters. We just don't have that capability. We don't know, around the world, when every sparrow falls.

SCHAKNE: Defense Department officials say that a nearby American RC-135 reconnaissance plane was looking for the Soviet missile test and never identified Flight 007. Pentagon sources told CBS News that when Soviet interceptors scrambled, the RC-135 was flying in the opposite direction, 250 miles away, it's mission over, most of its sensors turned off and its crew unaware that the Korean plane was crossing into Soviet air space. But American intelligence officials are not telling all they know, a fear, they say, of disclosing to the Soviets, American intelligence capability. For their part, the Soviets have completely refused to cooperate with international investigations. And last fall, efforts to recover the most critical piece of evidence, 007's flight recorder, from the ocean failed. Without the black box, the uncertainties remain, the questions go unanswered, and the conspiracy theories flourish. The events of the last year, according to one government official, should shatter two myths. The first, that commercial airline pilots necessarily know where they're at and whether they're on course. Sometimes they don't. And the second, that American intelligence always knows, instantaneously, what's going on everywhere in the world. It doesn't. Robert Schakne, CBS News, Anchorage.